

Alfred Russel Wallace Notes 20: Did Darwin and Wallace “Coauthor” the 1858 Communication on Natural Selection?

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Summary: Alfred Russel Wallace (1823–1913) and Charles Darwin (1809-1882) both contributed words to the first significant public announcement of the theory of natural selection in 1858. The resulting publication has often been styled a ‘coauthored’ effort, but in this note reasons are offered for believing otherwise. *Key words:* Alfred Russel Wallace, Charles Darwin, natural selection, history of science, coauthorship

Introduction

When in mid-1858 Alfred Russel Wallace famously contacted Charles Darwin with his draft of a paper describing the concept of natural selection, Darwin was devastated: a priority conflict appeared imminent. Darwin’s friends Sir Charles Lyell and Joseph Hooker offered up a solution to the dilemma: though Wallace had not specifically asked that his essay be considered for publication, they would take the work, along with parallel thoughts Darwin had informally committed to paper some years earlier, and present the lot to the Fellows attending the next meeting of the Linnean Society. This took place on 1 July 1858, with the text of the communication appearing in the Society’s *Journal of Proceedings: Zoology* a couple of months later. Significantly, this was arranged without seeking Wallace’s permission first.

There were two Darwin excerpts involved, and these were printed first, with Wallace’s more organized essay, titled ‘On the Tendency of Varieties to Depart Indefinitely from the Original Type,’ bringing up the rear. Lyell and Huxley wrote a several hundred word introduction to the three-part feature, which overall was printed under the title ‘On the Tendency of Species to Form Varieties; and On the Perpetuation of Varieties and Species by Natural Means of Selection.’ Lyell and Huxley thus effectively served a dual role as sponsors and editors for the communication.

It has become increasingly common practice to refer to this publication as having been ‘co-authored’ by Darwin and Wallace. While it is true that at the head of the printed communication the words “By Charles Darwin and Alfred Wallace” stand, I would argue that this work can hardly be considered an instance of co-authorship, and that it is important to acknowledge such.

Centrally, implicit in the concept of ‘co-authorship’ are the notions that each of the listed authors of a particular work: (1) are aware of its entire content (2) have contributed something significant to same, and (3) are specifically desirous of being identified as one of its creators (indeed, statements regarding such are often required prior to acceptance of current-day manuscripts for publication). All three conditions must be observed, although the exact nature of the relationships may vary somewhat: for example, a graduate assistant who is merely following orders and had no role in the design of a piece

of research nevertheless deserves recognition of coauthorship if he or she actually carried out some significant part of the work involved. In the present instance, none of these three conditions holds. In fact, they can hardly hold less: (1) Wallace knew nothing of Darwin's development of the natural selection concept or of the existence of his extracts (2) neither party contributed anything to the other's writings or used those writings to bolster their own, and (3) in the case of Wallace, he was neither seeking a direct route to publication, nor was even consulted before his contribution reached print (and, significantly, he later complained about this in print, if obliquely, five times over the next thirty-five years: see Smith 2008, note 5, p. 420).

In fact, the only thing that actually connects the contributions by the two parties involved is that they concern the same – and new – subject. The Linnean Society publication most closely resembles what we would in this day term a 'special feature,' having the form of the now commonly-seen 'special issue,' complete with separate editor and an overall title distinct from those of its component writings. What we should call the Darwin-Wallace contribution is not clear, but it certainly is not a 'co'-anything.

Of course one might, as sometimes has been done, refer to the contributions as having been 'jointly presented' or 'jointly published,' but even there, there is a nontrivial complication: neither author was present at their reading to the Fellows, and, again, Wallace was given no say on either the matter of presentation, or publication. The role of 'joint presenters' or 'joint publishers' (actually, sponsors/editors) would almost seem to more aptly apply to Hooker and Lyell.

Who Cares?

I would be the first to admit that this would be making a mountain of a molehill, were questions of form all that mattered. But they are not. Inevitably, the similarity of the ideas expressed in these 'not intended for publication' writings has since their time been interpreted as indicating that Darwin and Wallace shared a nearly identical vision at that point of how evolution *in general* proceeded. More specifically, it has been assumed that Wallace's 'unapproved' essay, because it makes no mention of humankind, buys into the Darwinian notion that our 'higher attributes' have come about in the same general fashion that simpler attributes, such as shape and color, have. Given this assumption, Wallace becomes an easy target for later having 'changed his mind' regarding the former, on his exposure to spiritualism around 1865, and subsequent re-formulation of position.

In point of fact (and as I have been arguing for many years: e.g., Smith 1991, 2002, 2004, 2008, 2012, 2013, 2019), there is not a shred of evidence that over the period 1858 to 1864 Wallace had been operating along conventional Darwinian lines with respect to his understanding of the place of these 'higher attributes' in human evolution. Not only does he not tackle this subject in any of his private or public writings from this time, but he never later stated that he was an adherent of this perspective at that point. An assumption that he was, has led to the possible misperception that his later 'change of mind' was actually a '*reversal* of mind' with respect to his attitude toward natural selection. No one (including myself) doubts that his position shifted, but there is often a lot of distance between the terms 'shift' and 'reversal.' In Wallace's case, it appears to me he never believed materialistic natural selection could explain humankind's 'higher faculties,' and it took him seven years after 1858 to work out a model that did. The deciding period of his

thought process is reflected in three short items he presented or published between September 1864 and June 1865 (Wallace 1865a, 1865b, 1866), just before his concerted examination of spiritualism.

These three communications are essential to understanding Wallace's position on human/social evolution, and why he took to investigating spiritualism in mid-1865. In them he makes a series of points regarding what kind of influences might be needed to sustain a fruitful course of human mental and social evolution. In the summer of 1865 he began his exploration of spiritualism – both its phenomena, and its literature – and eventually convinced himself that this was the way the job got done.

To summarize: Had Wallace continued to toe the line spelled out in his and Darwin's 1858 writings, there would be little point in trying to object that Wallace actually had further thoughts on the subject than he was expressing at the time. But his thoughts did not remain unchanged, leading one reasonably to question the extent of his earlier agreement. Thus Wallace's adoption of spiritualism circa 1866 was *either* a reversal of position, or the adoption of an augmentation.

Beyond the arguments supporting the second interpretation spelled out in my writings listed above, we may take note of two further items. First, it is apparent that Wallace's important philosophical influences included Humboldtian/Spinozian ideals (e.g., "there are always more remote principles operating than we are currently aware of") that were foreign to Darwin's palette. Thus, it is all the more surprising they would agree on as much as they did in 1858.

Second, another telling indicator of Wallace's level of indecision during the early 1860s is provided by his account of first meeting Herbert Spencer:

Soon after my return home, in 1862 or 1863, Bates and I, having both read "First Principles" and been immensely impressed by it, went together to call on Herbert Spencer, I think by appointment. Our thoughts were full of the great unsolved problem of the origin of life – a problem which Darwin's "Origin of Species" left in as much obscurity as ever – and we looked to Spencer as the one man living who could give us some clue to it. His wonderful exposition of the fundamental laws and conditions, actions and interactions of the material universe seemed to penetrate so deeply into that "nature of things" after which the early philosophers searched in vain and whose blind gropings are so finely expressed in the grand poem of Lucretius, that we both hoped he could throw some light on that great problem of problems. I forget the details of the interview, but I think Bates was chief spokesman, and expressed our immense admiration of his work, and that as young students of nature we wished to have the honour of his acquaintance. He was very pleasant, spoke appreciatively of what we had both done for the practical exposition of evolution, and hoped we would continue to work at the subject. But when we ventured to touch upon the great problem, and whether he had arrived at even one of the first steps towards its solution, our hopes were dashed at once. That, he said, was too fundamental a problem to even think of solving at present. We did not yet know enough of matter in its essential constitution nor of the various forces of nature; and all he could say was that everything pointed to its having been a development out of matter – a phase of that continuous process of evolution by which the whole universe had been brought to its present condition. So we had to wait and work contentedly at minor problems. And now, after forty years, though Spencer and Darwin and Weismann have thrown floods of light

on the phenomena of life, its essential nature and its origin remain as great a mystery as ever. Whatever light we do possess is from a source which Spencer and Darwin neglected or ignored. (Wallace 1905, vol. 2: pp. 23-24)

Had Wallace at that point been wholly content with Darwinian thinking, why would he have conducted such an interview, and then been content to “wait and work contentedly” at “minor problems”?

It is therefore incumbent that we cease putting words into Wallace’s mouth, including refraining from calling the Darwin-Wallace communication an instance of ‘co-authorship.’ Wallace may well turn out to be wrong in some of his *conclusions*, but this is no reason to distort the history involved to serve potentially misleading agendas. Further discussion of this subject is present in the next several writings in this series, now under preparation and review.

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